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ABSTRACT

In a collaborative learning experience at the South Carolina Humanities and Writing Institute, writing process teaching methods were used to teach literature. "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" was used as a prototype study for the group, while at the same time, each teacher-fellow developed his or her own literature study and teaching plan as an individual project. For one of the major assignments, each person produced a piece of creative writing that would become part of a published anthology of literature. Response groups became the forum for discussing ideas for each piece and then for responding to each person's writing, from rough, informal freewriting through several drafts until a finished piece was produced. (EL)

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# Teachers Collaborating as Readers and Writers

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In his book Education and Ecstasy from the late 1960's, George Leonard creates a mental image that has fascinated me for these many years. In a chapter on the shape of schools in the future, Leonard describes a room containing a bank of computers, enough for a dozen students each to have their individual console. They work together in this spacious, round, high-ceilinged room, with screens circling the outer wall above the computers. A child dons a headset connected to the computer, through which brain signals feed, that are then translated into visual images and projected onto the screen above the child's head.

As one child imagines a scenario from a book she is reading, another child next to her projects onto his screen thoughts about a problem he is attempting to solve. As Leonard describes the technological scenario, an element from one child's image may--on the screen above--slip over into the image of another child. For instance, a character image from her story may wander into the image of the problem he is trying to solve, and the new element it introduces may make him see his problem in a new light.

This fictional scenario has long been an image in my mind illustrating the concept of collaborative learning. Such a

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technology would make it possible for answers to my questions to be influenced more easily by thoughts from another person. With our ideas and images in the open, as on the screen above, we could more easily collaborate; or collate: slip an idea in between others. When ideas are juxtaposed with one another, they influence each other; they shape each other. If two or more people expose their ideas to each other in this way, the outcome of the thinking will reflect the shape of the combined ideas.

What I have described above is to me a fanciful definition of collaborative learning. On the more concrete level, I see collaborative learning as a group of people tackling some learning problem together. One's communication of thoughts stimulates the thinking of another, and then another. The whole group benefits from concerted efforts to creatively explore together facets of a problem or idea. Thinking in concert produces richer and more varied ideas than those possible by one person thinking in isolation.

Such a collaborative experience was the South Carolina Humanities and Writing Institute, in which I participated as director during the summer of 1985. (It was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Lyndhurst Foundation, the International Paper Company, the University of South Carolina, and other South Carolina colleges.) I will describe some our collaborative learning experiences.

Our charge was to apply the writing project model of teacher

education to humanities content. In other words, we used writing process teaching methods to teach literature. Each teacher-fellow developed his or her own literature study and teaching plan as an individual project, but the whole group collaborated on the study of one piece of literature: in this case, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. This piece of literature, through our collaboration, became the prototype study for the individual projects. It also formed the focal point of our discussions, giving us a topic which we could carry as far as our combined minds would allow.

We read Huck Finn together during the Institute, although almost everybody had read the book sometime in the past, or at least knew the story through a movie production. Many of the teachers in the group had studied it intensively, and some had taught it in their own high school English classes. We discussed the book daily; we free wrote about ideas as a stimulus for discussion; we each wrote a paper on some idea from the book--a paper that could be loosely described as literary criticism; we used our response groups for discussions about the book, and in addition, for feedback about the papers we were writing; we discussed the history of the period and the light it throws on the story and its themes, as well as the art and music of the period to see how other arts might have reflected the mood of the times and the story.

One of our most extended discussions was about ways of teaching

Huck Finn. As a culmination of this discussion, each teacher-fellow wrote down teaching ideas for the book, all of which we compiled as a collaborative guide to the teaching of Huck Finn. This idea, perhaps as much as any of the ideas listed above, represents what can result from a collaborative study: in this case, a document that gathers the good teaching ideas from eighteen strong teachers, stimulated in a discussion by their colleagues. This discussion took place well into the five-week session, after we knew each other well and had come to trust each other so that we could risk creative thinking aloud.

communication is perhaps the seminal aspect of collaborative learning. Without communication, collaborative learning in which the participants benefit from each others' observations cannot occur. Thus, a collaborative learning situation demands that effective communication operate in the group. The method of the "response groups" used in the writing project model of teacher education greatly enhanced the communication in our group.

Response groups consist of four or five Institute fellows who form a small group that stays together throughout the Institute. They meet frequently for discussion of whatever ideas, projects, or papers they are working on at the time. Early in our Institute we began with personal writing: one of the major writing assignments of the institute was for each person to produce a piece of creative writing that would become a part of our published anthology of literature. The response groups

became the forum for discussing ideas for the piece, then responding to the writing of each group member as the piece developed from a spoken idea, to rough, informal freewriting, and on through the several drafts it took to produce a satisfactory finished draft for the publication. Attitudes toward work in the response groups were formed by this initial assignment, and each of the major assignments throughout the five-week session was processed through the response group, including, of course, the formal paper written about an idea from Huck Finn. As you can imagine, a great deal of discussion took place during these sessions.

At first the Institute fellows found it threatening to have to produce a piece of "literature." So we began the response groups by trying to encourage each other, rather than being critical in a negative way. Because each was experiencing the threat of the assignment, everybody knew it was important to nurture rather than to criticize. Because of this attitude, I believe, the groups early on gained a sense of trust and helpfulness because of the care taken by the members to encourage each other. We always stressed the need for helpfulness in the group; the major purpose of the group was to assist each individual each time it met. (Groups met usually two or three times a week, for a period of at least 45 minutes or an hour.) The beginning attitudes of trust and help carried into all of the assignments as they were analyzed in the group. Such an atmosphere of psychological safety enhances collaborative learning.

A safe learning atmosphere is doubly necessary for learning in a multicultural situation, as we observed in our own group. One of the reasons I had chosen The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn for our group study was its relevance to interracial groups in the South, so that we could confront the problem of perceived racist attitudes that Huck Finn brings up. One of the members of our group was incensed at the free use of the word "nigger" she encountered as she delved into the book. It was very instructive for us to understand--by listening to her talk--her image attached to that response-inducing word, nigger. Through much discussion during our three-week study of Huck Finn, this teacher communicated that after forcing herself to read on following her initial rejection of the book for its racist attitude, she could see how the book fosters a great appreciation of the negro Jim and that it is a very positive view of a black person. Through intercultural collaboration we were able to see this book as a positive educational reading experience--for mature enough readers. The group agreed that Huck Finn is probably not appropriate for pre-adolescent students because of the maturity needed to understand the complex human relationships and attitudes portrayed in the story. Collaborative learning draws upon the variety of backgrounds and attitudes of its group members.

Thinking back to the George Leonard description of collaborative learning where one person's image--communicated via the computer screen--spills over into another's, we can see how collaboration

can occur through other kinds of communication, such as group discussion. In fact, the differences in the group form a heuristic for creative thinking: a group involving teachers from different subjects and different grade levels forces us to try to apply ideas appropriately in the different teaching situations; response group work, for instance, can be adapted to apply in classes from kindergarten through college. Different cultures stimulate us to look at each others' ideas or images, such as the emotional image-baggage attached to a word like nigger. Or, people from different fields stimulate each other with their varying points of view on a given subject: the historian, the art historian, the philosopher all enlarge our understanding of Huck Finn.

The point of communication as the basis for collaboration may be most important of all. Through practice communicating with various types of people from different fields, different cultures, different segments of society, and different types of intelligence, we learn a kind of socialization--an ability to work together that may be our most valuable asset in our complex, multi-cultural, multi-faceted world.